

A Streetcar Named Desire

TENNESSEE WILLIAMS

1947

A Streetcar Named Desire is the story of an emotionally-charged confrontation between characters embodying the traditional values of the American South and the aggressive, rapidly-changing world of modern America. The play, begun in 1945, went through several changes before reaching its final form. Although the scenario initially concerned an Italian family, to which was later added an Irish brother-in-law, Tennessee Williams changed the characters to two Southern American belles and a Polish American man in order to emphasize the clash between cultures and classes in this story of alcoholism, madness and sexual violence.

A Streetcar Named Desire was staged in the United States in 1947 in Boston and New York. A film version appeared in 1951, directed by Elia Kazan. The play, first published in book form in 1947 (New York: New Directions), was issued again with an introduction by the author in 1951. In 1953 an edition for actors was brought out by the Dramatists' Play Service. In England, editions appeared in 1949 (London: John Lehman) and 1956 (Secker and Warburg). Penguin Books now incorporates *Streetcar* with two of Williams' other plays, *Sweet Bird of Youth* and *The Glass Menagerie*, in a volume of its Twentieth Century Classics Series.



AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Tennessee Williams was born Thomas Lanier Williams on March 26, 1914, in Columbus, Mississippi, the son of Cornelius Coffin Williams and Edwina Dakin. The nickname Tennessee was not acquired until he was grown and attending college. Williams had an elder sister, Rose, who was later committed to a mental institution, and a younger brother, Walter Dakin. Because their father often worked away from home, Williams and his siblings were particularly close to their mother, a Southern belle and daughter of an Episcopal minister who enjoyed her status as a pillar of town society.

In 1918 the Williams family moved to St Louis. As Cornelius began to drink heavily and became increasingly moody, Edwina voiced her resentment at losing both her place in society and her close ties with her parents. In response to this unhappiness, and to the emotional pain of being bullied by children in the neighborhood, Williams began to read books and write his own stories; years later, in the foreword to *Sweet Bird of Youth* he commented that writing was “an escape from a world of reality in which I felt acutely uncomfortable. It immediately became my place of retreat, my cave, my refuge.”

Beginning in 1929 Williams studied at the University of Missouri at Columbia, at Washington University in St Louis, and at the University of Iowa, meanwhile making a name for himself as a writer. Although this period was a creative one, and one in which his personal life settled down (he seems to have come to terms with his homosexuality at this point), there were also difficult times to endure. In response to his sister Rose’s extreme mental instability, Edwina Williams consented to having a pre-frontal lobotomy performed on Rose, from which the young woman emerged severely changed.

Williams’ emergence as a major new force in American theater occurred with the debut performance of *The Glass Menagerie* in 1944. He soon moved to New Orleans, the city which later figured strongly in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, and spent time in Europe and in Florida, where he bought a house. *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* was the playwright’s next major commercial success in 1955 but by this time Williams’ physical health was deteriorating and he was relying increasingly on alcohol and drugs. Numerous other plays followed, some of

them successful, but his personal life remained in turmoil. In fits of paranoia, he quarreled with his agent, Audrey Wood, and his lover Frank Merlo. In 1966 his brother Dakin was contacted when Williams’ health was particularly poor, and during the time he spent with Dakin he converted to Roman Catholicism. In the following years several unsuccessful plays were written and performed, and several of his earlier, acclaimed plays were revived. In 1983, after a spell of depression, Williams traveled to Sicily, remaining only a few days before returning to New York, where he died during the night of February 24 in the Elysee Hotel after choking on a barbiturate.

PLOT SUMMARY

Scenes 1 and 2

The play opens in a shabby district of New Orleans where Stanley Kowalski lives with his wife Stella. After they leave for the bowling alley, where Stanley is to play with his friend Mitch, a well-dressed woman arrives carrying a suitcase. This is Blanche DuBois, Stella’s sister. Hardly believing that this is Stella’s home, Blanche ungraciously accepts the invitation of the landlady, Eunice, to wait inside. She appears nervous and highly strung and searches out a supply of alcohol, supposedly to calm her nerves. When Stella returns they greet each other fondly, but there is a hint of unease between them.

On his return home, Stanley meets Blanche and they talk amicably, but as the conversation develops and as details of Blanche’s past come out—particularly her marriage to a husband who is now dead, and the loss of Belle Reve, the family’s property—we see Stanley beginning to distrust her. Blanche makes herself very much at home, taking long and frequent baths and drinking Stanley’s alcohol, even whilst making disparaging comments about Stanley and Stella’s standard of living.

Scene 3

The tension in the house continues in the next scene when the sisters return after an evening out to the house where Stanley is holding a poker party. Resenting the interest that Mitch, one of his friends, shows in Blanche, the now drunken Stanley shows his jealousy of Blanche and becomes violent with

Stella, who we now know is pregnant. After retreating briefly upstairs to the Hubbells' apartment, Stella returns to Stanley and they go off to bed together.

Scene 4

Despite this brutality and Blanche's attempts to persuade her to leave him, Stella insists that she loves Stanley and will not leave him. Overhearing Blanche's hostile comments about him, Stanley determines to follow his suspicions about her and to find out more about her recent past. He discovers that she left Laurel, her home town, because of rumors about her promiscuity and her relationship with a young student.

Scene 5

When Stanley hints to Blanche about what he knows, she is clearly terrified that it will all come out and tries to present a glossed-over version to Stella, focusing on her fear of growing old alone and hinting at a possible future with Mitch. After Stella's departure, Blanche flirts with a young man who arrives to collect newspaper subscriptions.

Scene 6

Blanche and Mitch's date in the next scene is not a success, but when they return home they speak more openly and Blanche tells Mitch of her dead husband who, we gather, was homosexual, and shot himself when she discovered him in bed with another man. Mitch comforts her and they discuss marriage.

Scenes 7 and 8

Shortly afterwards there is a birthday dinner for Blanche, but Mitch, having been told by Stanley about Blanche's past, does not show up. The meal is awkwardly silent and, to make it worse, Stanley presents Blanche with a bus ticket back home as a supposed birthday gift. Stella complains at his cruelty, but then goes into labor. Stanley takes her to the hospital.

Scene 9

Mitch then visits Blanche, who is alone in the apartment. In a drunken state he tells her that he knows about her past and, when she tries to explain, dismisses her explanation as lies. He tries to force her to have sex but she resists and threatens to call



Tennessee Williams

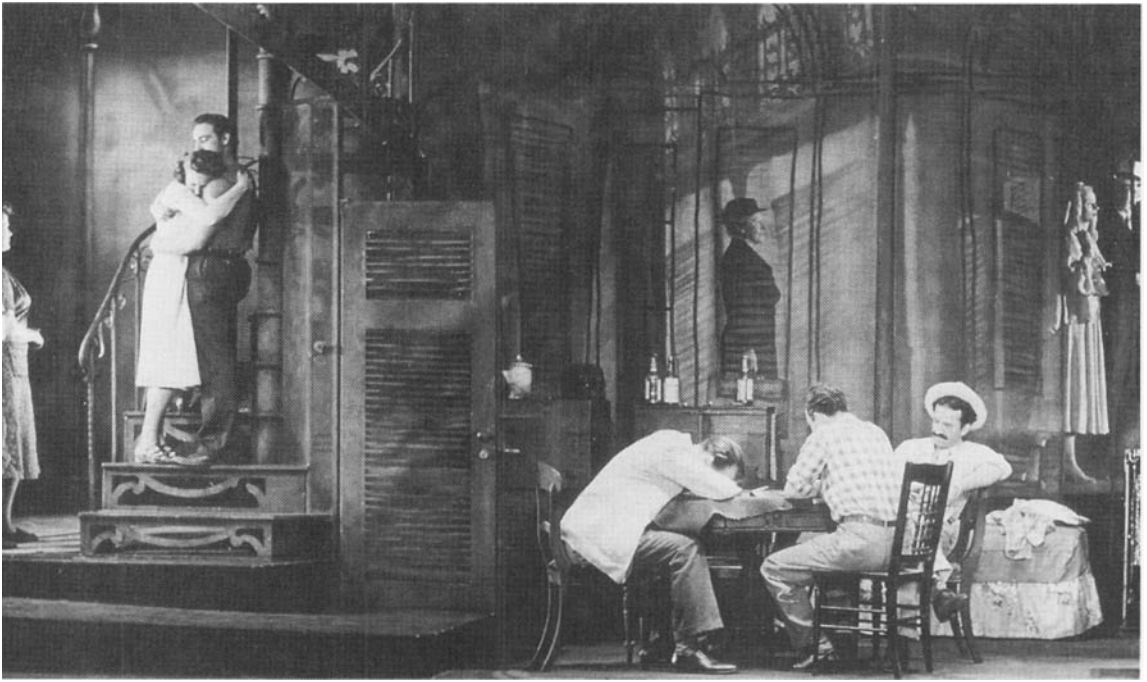
for help. Left alone again, she drinks more alcohol and loses herself in delusions of a rich millionaire who will look after her.

Scene 10

Stanley returns from the hospital to find Blanche dressed up in a ball gown and tiara, trying to pack her suitcase. He mocks her, tells her what he thinks of her, and allows his anger to be transformed into sexual violence as he carries her off to bed to rape her.

Scene 11

A scene change denotes the passing of time at this point and we next see Stella, returned from the hospital, unwilling to believe her sister's story and in agreement with Stanley that Blanche should be certified as insane. Blanche packs her things, believing that she is to leave with a rich admirer. While she is taking another bath and Stanley and his friends are again playing poker, a doctor arrives with a nurse from a mental hospital. Realizing what is about to happen, Blanche tries to escape, but is calmed by the gentle doctor. She leaves on his arm, stating that she has always placed her trust in the kindness of strangers. Stanley's friends are horrified and Stella is almost hysterical with tears, but



Marlon Brando as Stanley (on stairs at left) in a Broadway production

Stanley remains calm and soothes his wife into acquiescence. Life, it is suggested, will continue.

CHARACTERS

Doctor

The Doctor's role is to escort Blanche to the mental hospital. He is calm, professional, and treats Blanche respectfully in order for her to trust him.

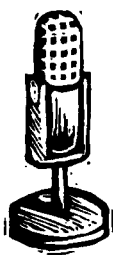
Blanche du Bois

Blanche DuBois is a complex individual who provokes strong reactions from the other characters. We know that she has been a schoolteacher in Mississippi but was asked to leave her job because of an involvement with a student, that she was once a Southern belle from a wealthy family, and that she has a failed marriage and dubious past from which she has fled. Her complexity comes not from her history or background, but from the varied and often inconsistent facades she presents. At once strong in her desires and determined in her claims on the men who are around her, and yet weak and forever looking for someone to take care of her, she gives

off a series of conflicting signals. She is neurotic, psychologically deluded about her beauty and attractiveness, and perhaps also an alcoholic. Her sexual desires come through clearly from behind her talk with Mitch about keeping her reputation: when we see her flirting with the young man who calls at the door, we realize just how split her desires are from her surface talk and behavior. This point is made visually in the opening scene where the dainty and beautifully dressed woman who appears leads us to expect quite a different character to emerge than the brittle woman running from her past who begins to display her neuroses and obsessions during the course of the following acts.

Underneath Blanche's quite calculating exterior, there is always a hint of hysteria. In her stories about Belle Reve or her tales of previous lovers, there is something edgy in her conversation, a threat of something that might erupt if she is not handled carefully. This disjunction between emotional surface and depth is brought out throughout the play in the way that Blanche cannot face up to her past, but only reveals glimpses of it through her neurotic behavior and occasional comments. For example, she is forever taking baths as if to clean her conscience, but continues to talk about her past actions in terms which suggest that she has no conception of

MEDIA ADAPTATIONS



- In addition to its successful run on Broadway, *A Streetcar Named Desire* was made into a film by Warner Bros. and was released in 1951. Many of its original cast were retained, including Marlon Brando as Stanley, but Jessica Tandy, who played Blanche, was replaced with Vivien Leigh. The film, directed by Elia Kazan, received numerous Academy Award nominations and carried off four Awards, including Best Actress for Leigh and Best Supporting Actress for Kim Hunter (Stella).
- A made-for-television version appeared in 1984 with Ann-Margret as Blanche. Although this production reinstated some of the material which the censors had objected to in the 1950s, critics found it lacking in the spark and chemistry of the earlier version.
- An unrated television version of 1995 recreated the 1992 stage version which starred Jessica Lange and Alec Baldwin. Again, it is truer to the dialogue and actions of the original stage production than the censored 1951 film.
- Two sound recordings are available: HarperCollins's 1991 version stars Rosemary Harris and James Farentino in a 1973 recording of a production at the Repertory Theater of Lincoln Center. Caedmon's 1985 publication is from the same production.
- The play was adapted by the Dance Theatre of Harlem featuring Virginia Johnson as Blanche.

their moral implications. Admitting, for example, that it is her affairs which have led to her losing her job and being ruined financially, she can only ask Stella, in a roundabout fashion, "Haven't you ever ridden on that streetcar [named Desire]? . . . It brought me here." In similarly oblique terms, she describes a passionate affair as "someone you go out with—once—twice—three times when the devil is in you." Her flirtation with Stanley and the man at the door also suggest that she does not have the self-awareness to realize that what she is doing here is no different from the things she has done in the past which she claims to regret so much.

Not only does Blanche lack self-awareness, she is also utterly self-centered. As a house-guest in a small apartment, her behavior is intensely irritating. (If David Mamet's play *Oleanna* could be described as a play about a man who needs an answering machine, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is a play about a man who needs a guest room.) Not only must Blanche's presence disrupt Stanley and Stella's sexual intimacy, but it also spoils the routine of their everyday life, particularly because she is al-

ways in the bath when anyone else needs to use the bathroom. The fact that she freely (and dishonestly) drinks Stanley's whisky and that she sends the pregnant Stella off to run errands for her further emphasizes a selfish nature.

Yet, despite her contradictions, dishonesty, inconsistency, and selfishness, Blanche comes across as a sympathetic, if not entirely likeable, character. Williams himself commented that "... when I think about her, Blanche seems like the youth of our hearts which has to be put away for worldly considerations: poetry, music, the early soft feelings that we can't afford to live with under a naked light bulb which is now." Even though her faults are plain to see, Blanche still commands pity. Williams thought that this pity was an important element of the play. In a letter to Elia Kazan, the first director of *Streetcar*, he answered a question which Kazan had put to him, saying, "I remember you asked me what should an audience feel for Blanche. Certainly pity. It is a tragedy with the classic aim of producing a catharsis of pity and terror and in order to do that, Blanche must finally have the understanding and

compassion of the audience. This without creating a black-dyed villain in Stanley. It is a thing (Misunderstanding with a capital M) not a person (Stanley) that destroys her in the end. In the end you should feel 'If only they had known about each other.' Perhaps part of the reason for this pity is that Blanche's tragedy does not come about only because of her actions, but because of the flaws of society itself. As the old gentility of the South is threatened by modernization and industrialization, and as women's roles become uncertain as they are caught between old ideals of beauty and gentility and the modern toleration of sexual license, Blanche appears to be stranded at a crossroads, with each choice of path risking society's disapproval and her ultimate destruction.

Pablo Gonzales

Pablo Gonzales is the other player at poker along with Stanley, Mitch, and Steve. He is coarse and loud, a strong, physical character who is, according to the stage directions, "at the peak of [his] physical manhood." He also speaks Spanish.

Eunice and Steve Hubbell

Eunice and Steve Hubbell, the landlords who live upstairs from Stanley and Stella, are a vision of what Stanley and Stella could become. Eunice is overweight and run down from too many pregnancies while Steve is not particularly understanding or supportive of his wife. Domestic violence appears to be routine in their marriage. Despite their failings, however, Steve and Eunice are not unlikeable characters. They are hospitable and neighborly and take Stella in when she seeks refuge from Stanley. Their audible presence upstairs gives a sense of the cramped living conditions in which the play's actions occur.

Stanley Kowalski

Much of Stanley's character is seen through his relationship with Blanche. Stanley does not seem to have a life outside of the immediate action of the play, but when he is onstage he has a commanding presence, a quality underlined by Blanche's obvious sexual attraction to him. She even jokingly tells Stella that she has been flirting with Stanley to get him to see her side of the story about the loss of Belle Reve. While this may be her motivation, it's obvious that Blanche is genuinely attracted to Stanley and that flirting does not take too much effort on her part.

Blanche's response to Stanley's strong presence suggests that he is some kind of an animal. In earlier versions of the play, Stanley had a gentler, ineffectual side, but in the final writing of *Streetcar* Williams made him Blanche's complete opposite—angry, animalistic, and reliant on his basest instincts. These qualities are seen most clearly in Blanche's rather patronizing, but highly revealing comment to Stanley that "You're simple, straightforward and honest, a little bit on the primitive side I should think. To interest you a woman would have to . . ." The sentence is finished off for her by Stanley, but what we suspect she would have said is what she later says to Stella: that the only way to live with a man like Stanley is to go to bed with him. For Blanche, Stanley's sexual appeal and his primitive nature are closely bound up together. It is from the charge of such opposing feelings as attraction and disgust, expressed in this case through Blanche's eyes, that the play gains much of its energy.

Although Stanley responds in kind to Blanche's flirtations, telling her that "If I didn't know that you was my wife's sister I'd get ideas about you," we know that actually he despises her and is enjoying the power that comes from being aware of the feelings she has for him. Stanley's actions are what would now be described as "macho." But not only is he violent in his masculinity, he also appears to lack any sense of moral order: his rape of Blanche does not strike him as betraying any moral code, it is simply the outcome of their strained relationship and what he deems to be her inappropriate behavior in the immediate and more distant past.

This action is consistent with his character in the rest of the play and in the events which are meant to have taken place before the play begins. Stanley has power despite his lower social class, but, as he is well aware, it lies in his physical actions. Talking of his wooing of Stella and the difference in their social backgrounds, he comments, "I pulled you down off them columns and you loved it." The social significance of his physical action, like his later rape of Blanche, suggests that the sources of power have changed in American culture and that Stanley is willing to grasp at whatever power he can find in order to assert his place in the family and society around him.

Where Stanley does have an identity independent from that created by the events of the play, he could be said to represent the new social order of modern America as a contrast to the decayed gen-

tility of Blanche's Southern manners. This is also seen in the fact that Williams makes him an immigrant who is proud to be part of the new society of a multi-cultural America. As such an immigrant, he is not concerned about traditions or old hierarchies of land ownership or the power and wealth brought by family positions in society (he appeals instead to the local law of the Napoleonic code to prove that he has been swindled by Blanche's loss of Belle Reve). Stanley's determination to belong to American society and to claim his place there is emphasized by his impassioned outburst in response to being called a "Polack." As he forcefully explains, "I am not a Polack. People from Poland are Poles, not Polacks. But what I am is one hundred percent American . . . so don't ever call me a Polack."

Stella Kowalski

Stella appears to be a simple character, but is actually more intriguing than her role as sister and wife to the play's two main protagonists would suggest. She acts as a foil to both characters, allowing their selfishness and emotional failings to be emphasized. She also acts as a measuring stick against which the audience can gauge society's reaction to the events portrayed on stage.

In relation to Stanley, Stella is sensitive and loving, practical and sometimes independent. She clearly loves Stanley, despite his many failings and his violence towards her, and she is willing to accept his temper as part of the passion they feel for each other: "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant." She is carrying Stanley's baby, and indeed Stanley's rape of Blanche takes place while she is in the hospital giving birth. In her blinkered loyalty to Stanley at the end of the play and in her willingness to be reassured that what they have done for Blanche is right, her practical nature asserts itself: this is a marriage which she can convince herself she wants to save and will save for the benefit of herself and her child. Whether she is right or wrong to do this is not relevant: what is important to understanding the play is the knowledge that her action is not so unusual. Like many other people in society, Stella continues to function in her daily life despite considerable upheaval. Blanche draws attention to this stoical aspect of Stella's character when she comments, "I never had your beautiful self-control."

Stella's decision symbolizes a greater choice facing American society. She rejects Blanche's

strategy of living in a glamorous past and chooses instead the rational, practical, sometimes flawed world which her marriage to Stanley represents.

Mexican woman

The Mexican woman appears briefly, speaks only Spanish, and is described as "An old Mexican crone."

Mitch

See Harold Mitchell

Harold Mitchell

Mitch is "207 pounds, six feet one and one-half inches" and lives with his sick mother. He is a foil to Stanley: he speaks in a more refined way, he is gentle and restrained while Stanley is rude and sexually forward. Blanche is aware of his kindness and even comments on it, saying, "I thanked God for you, because you seemed to be gentle." Mitch is concerned with proper behavior: in contrast to Stanley, who walks around in his T-shirt and speaks frankly (even proudly) of his sweaty body, Mitch refuses to take his jacket off because he fears he might be perspiring too much.

Mitch's attempted rape of Blanche therefore comes as a shock. The action suggests how male views of female behavior were so idealized that if a man discovered any deviation from accepted norms of virginity and chastity, his reaction would be extreme. Mitch's actions reveal him as a deluded and rather pathetic man who has not fully grasped how relationships work and who has closed his eyes to the fact that men and women can deceive one another.

It is, of course, Mitch's assault on Blanche which leaves her in such a genuinely forlorn state that she becomes vulnerable to Stanley's cruelty and unwanted sexual advances in the later scene. Although Mitch may be upstaged by his more powerful friend, his actions bring about the destructive ending of the play.

Negro woman

The Negro woman is a neighbor whose presence at the opening of the play reminds the audience of the cosmopolitan society in New Orleans. She is vulgar in her conversation, fun-loving and good-humored.

Nurse

The Nurse who accompanies the Doctor is cold and professional, severely dressed, and speaks in a voice which is “bold and toneless as a fire-bell.”

Young collector

The Young Collector calls to collect newspaper subscriptions. He is polite, reserved, and surprised by Blanche’s unexpected sexual advances.

THEMES

A Streetcar Named Desire opens with the arrival of Blanche DuBois, a Southern belle who has lost her inheritance, at the New Orleans home of her sister Stella and Stella’s husband Stanley. A conflict arises between Stanley and Blanche, and after several secrets about her past have been revealed, Stanley rapes Blanche while his wife is in the hospital giving birth. Stella, refusing to believe Blanche’s accusations, gives consent for the increasingly hysterical Blanche to be placed in a mental hospital.

Class Conflict

A major theme explored symbolically in *Streetcar* is the decline of the aristocratic family traditionally associated with the American South. These families had lost their historical importance as the agricultural base of the Southern states were unable to compete with the new industrialization. A labor shortage of agricultural workers developed in the South during the First World War because so many of the area’s men had to be employed either in the military or in defense-based industries. Many landowners, faced with large areas of land and no one to work on it, moved to urban areas. With the increasing industrialization which followed in the 1920s through the 1940s, the structure of the work force changed further: more women, immigrants, and black laborers entered the workforce and a growing urban middle class was created. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 and the old Southern tradition of an agrarian family aristocracy ruled by men began to come to an end.

In the context of this economic and cultural environment, Blanche represents the female aristocratic tradition of the Old South. Belle Reve, her

family home, is typical of the plantations that were being sold off as the aristocracy bowed out to the new urbanization. Blanche’s ultimate fate can be interpreted as the destruction of the Old South by the new, industrial America, represented by an immigrant to the U.S., Stanley Kowalski. Referring to his courtship of Stella, Stanley revealingly observes that, “When we first met, me and you, you thought I was common. How right you was, baby. I was common as dirt. You showed me the snapshot of the place with the columns [Belle Reve]. I pulled you down off them columns and how you loved it.” By the end of the play, Stanley’s aggression has triumphed over Blanche’s inherited family superiority. As she departs for the mental hospital, her old-fashioned manners are still apparent when she says to the men, “Please don’t get up.” Their politeness in rising is a small gesture, however, considering their role in Blanche’s destruction and in the fall of the Old South itself.

Sex Roles

Some of Blanche’s difficulties can be traced to the narrow roles open to females during this period. Although she is an educated woman who has worked as a teacher, Blanche is nonetheless constrained by the expectations of Southern society. She knows that she needs men to lean on and to protect her, and she continues to depend on them throughout the play, right up to her conversation with the doctor from the mental hospital, where she remarks, “Whoever you are, I have always depended on the kindness of strangers.” She has clearly known sexual freedom in the past, but understands that sexual freedom does not fit the pattern of chaste behavior to which a Southern woman would be expected to conform. Her fear of rejection is realized when Mitch learns of her love affairs back home. By rejecting Blanche and claiming that she is not the ideal woman he naively thought she was, Mitch draws attention to the discrepancy between how women really behaved and what type of behavior was publicly expected of them by society at large.

Violence and Cruelty

Violence in this play is fraught with sexual passion. Trying to convince Blanche of her love for Stanley despite his occasional brutality, Stella explains, “But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant.” Eunice and Steve Hubbell’s relationship also has this element of violence, and there is the unnerving suggestion

that violence is more common and more willingly accepted by the female partner in a marriage than one would like to believe.

Blanche translates Stella's comment into the context of sexual passion, claiming that, "What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another." Stella asks, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?" and Blanche responds, "It brought me here.—Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be." It appears that the connection in Blanche's past between violence and desire in some way contributes to the events within the time scale of the play. This is not to excuse Stanley's later act of violence or to suggest that Blanche brings it on herself—rather, Williams is demonstrating how a cycle of violence, combined with passion and desire, is hard to break.

Madness

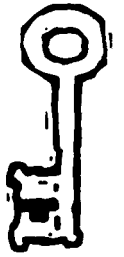
Considering how Tennessee Williams' sister Rose was the recipient of a lobotomy, the theme of madness running through *Streetcar* in the form of Blanche's neurosis and self-delusion may reveal some of the playwright's fears about the instability of his own mental life. His lingering regrets and guilt about Rose's treatment may also be seen in Stella's anguished cry as Blanche is taken away: "What have I done to my sister? Oh, God, what have I done to my sister?"

STYLE

Scene Structure

The most striking feature of *Streetcar's* dramatic structure is its division into scenes rather than acts. Each of the eleven scenes that make up the play ends in a dramatic climax, and the tension of each individual scene builds up to the tension of the final climax. This structure allows the audience to focus on the emotions and actions of Blanche—the only character to appear in every scene. The audience is sympathetic to Blanche because they see more of her inner thoughts and motivations than the other characters on stage. Note, for example, how only the audience is aware of how much alcohol she is drinking. The scene organization adds to the audience's sense of tragedy—Blanche's destruction

TOPICS FOR FURTHER STUDY



- Investigate the emergence of industrialization and the decline of the old Southern aristocracy in the USA and analyze what bearing this has on *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- With whom does the audience's sympathy lie in *A Streetcar Named Desire*?: Blanche? Stanley? Both? Neither?
- Discuss the importance of New Orleans—its geography, its transport system, its laws, its music and culture—as a setting for *A Streetcar Named Desire*.
- Examine the scene structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*, paying particular attention to the beginnings and endings of scenes and the dramatic climaxes that they create.

is inevitable, signaling the inexorable passage of the drama and of her movement towards a final breakdown.

That Williams chose to organize his play this way may reveal his interest in film and the possibilities inherent in that medium for combining several visually dramatic incidents into a coherent experience. He also wrote a number of one-act plays during his career.

Motifs

In order to connect the separate incidents of Blanche's story, Williams provided dramatic motifs and details of setting which are repeated at significant moments during the play and which signal changes in mood and tone and highlight the reemergence of crucial themes.

As the title of the play suggests, the motif of the streetcar is a crucial one, pointing to the growth of the suburbs and the urbanization of the play as well as the unrelenting and unforgiving continuation of life itself. To arrive at Stella's apartment in New Orleans, Blanche must transfer from a streetcar

called *Desire* to one called *Cemeteries* in order to get to the slum known as *Elysian Fields*. These were actual New Orleans names but their careful combination introduces the themes of death and desire that resonate through the play. Williams wrote that the streetcars' "indiscourageable progress up and down Royal Street struck me as having some symbolic bearing of a broad nature on the life in the *Vieux Carre*,—and everywhere else, for that matter." An element of the play which is always heard rather than seen, the streetcar nonetheless adds much to the mood of the play and is a continual but subtle reminder of the play's setting.

Music

Music plays a similarly important part in the stage craft of the play. Two kinds of music dominate: the first type is what Williams called "blue piano"—the blues music first associated with Southern Blacks. Later to develop into the music of New Orleans' bars and night clubs, it suggests unrestrained physical pleasure, animal strength and vitality and appears at significant emotional moments in the play—for example, when *Blanche* tells of the loss of *Belle Reve* and when she hears about *Stella's* pregnancy. It is also heard during moments of leisure, when people are drinking and having fun. But, in a darker mood, it appears at the moment of the rape in scene ten, signifying animal desires, and again at the very end of the play when *Stanley* is consoling *Stella* and enabling her to forget about *Blanche*.

In contrast to the recurring blue piano, which highlights the animal emotions of some characters, the polka known as the *Varsouviana*, heard only by *Blanche*, signals crucial moments in the development of the plot. Once the audience discovers that this music reminds *Blanche* of the scene on the ballroom floor when she renounced her husband, one anticipates imminent disaster whenever the music appears and reappears—particularly in the last scene of the play. It also accompanies moments of cruelty, like *Stanley's* gift to *Blanche* of a bus-ticket back home.

Both kinds of music underline the nature of the situation which is being played out on stage and stress the location of the play's actions both in the past lives of its characters and in the cultural context of New Orleans.

The dramatic organization of the play into scenes which build, through recurring themes and

motifs, on the ongoing tension of the play suggest the accuracy of Arthur Miller's description of Williams' "rhapsodic insistence that form serve his utterance rather than dominating and cramping it."

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Many of the major themes of *A Streetcar Named Desire* are embodied in the history and culture of New Orleans. The lively setting of the French Quarter, with its streetcars, bars, entertainment, and jazz and blues music, provides a rich background for the emotional events of the play; the setting also draws symbolic attention to changes which were taking place in American society, especially in the South during the post-World War II years.

Napoleonic Code

When *Stanley* feels he is being swindled by *Blanche's* loss of *Belle Reve*, he appeals to the Napoleonic Code, a set of laws devised by the French and implemented when they ruled the region known now as Louisiana. The state of Louisiana continued to operate under some of the precepts of the Napoleonic Code, such as the Code's emphasis on inheritance law: any property belonging to a spouse prior to marriage becomes the property of both spouses once they are married. *Stanley*, therefore, is legally correct to claim that, by depriving *Stella* of her share of the family inheritance, *Blanche* has also deprived him.

The South

On a more general level, the play represents the decline of the aristocratic families traditionally associated with the South. These once-influential families had lost their historical importance when the South's agricultural base was unable to compete with the new industrialization. The region's agrarian economy, which had been in decline since the Confederate defeat in the Civil War, suffered further setbacks after the First World War. A labor shortage hindered Southern agriculture when large numbers of male laborers were absorbed by the military or defense-based industries. Many landowners, faced with large areas of land and no one to work on it, moved to urban areas. With the increasing industrialization that followed during the 1920s

COMPARE & CONTRAST

- **1947:** Hungary becomes a Soviet satellite after Hungarian Communists, backed by the Red Army, seize power while Prime Minister Ferenc Nagy is on holiday. Anti-Communist sentiment builds in the U.S. The Truman Doctrine announces plans to aid Greece and Turkey and proposes economic aid to countries threatened by Communist takeover. The CIA is authorized by Congress to counter Moscow's attempts to establish governments through local Communist parties in Western Europe.

Today: Communism has all but broken down since the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Revolutions in Czechoslovakia, Poland, and East Germany, as well as the break-up of the Soviet Union have eliminated many of the barriers between East and West. Eastern European countries are now undergoing a slow and difficult transformation to a market economy.

- **1947:** New technology: the first commercial microwave oven is introduced by the Raytheon Co. of Waltham, Massachusetts. Tubeless automobile tires, which seal themselves when punctured, are introduced by B.F. Goodrich. Howard Hughes' new seaplane, the Spruce Goose, the largest plane ever built, takes off for a one-mile flight across Long Beach Harbor before it is retired for good.

Today: Most American homes have a microwave, as well as toasters, coffee makers, freezers, and numerous other examples of electrical gadgetry. Cars are commonplace but their emissions, along with those from airplanes and heavy industry, contribute to the global problem of pollution.

- **1947:** New consumable goods appear as America begins to recover from the effects of the Second World War. Frozen orange juice concentrate sales in the U.S. reach seven million cans. Reddi-Whip introduces whipped cream in aerosol cans. Sugar rationing ends on June 11. Monosodium glutamate (MSG) is marketed for the first time, and butylated hydroxyanisole (BHA) is introduced commercially to retard spoilage in foods.

Today: Annual sales of convenience food reach new heights every year. Processed and "fast" food is readily available to Americans; consumers who maintain unhealthy diets and sedentary lifestyles significantly increase their risk of contracting heart disease and cancer. Additives are common in food and new developments, such as genetically engineered foods, continue to make headlines.

through the 1940s, the structure of the work force evolved more radically yet, incorporating large numbers of women, immigrants, and blacks. Women gained the right to vote in 1920 and the old Southern tradition of an agrarian family aristocracy ruled by men started to come to an end.

Women's Roles

Some of Blanche's difficulties can be traced to the narrow roles open to females during this period. Although she is an educated woman who has worked as a teacher, Blanche is nonetheless constrained by

the expectations of Southern society. She knows that she needs men to lean on and to protect her. She has clearly known sexual freedom in the past, but understands that sexual freedom does not fit the pattern of chaste behavior to which a Southern woman would be expected to conform. Her fear of rejection is realized when Mitch learns of her love affairs back home. By rejecting Blanche and claiming that she is not the ideal woman he naively thought she was, Mitch draws attention to the discrepancy between how women really behaved and what type of behavior was publicly expected of them by society at large.

Writing of the play's setting, Williams noted that "I write out of love of the South . . . (which) once had a way of life that I am just old enough to remember—a culture that had grace, elegance, an inbred culture, not a society based on money." Through the destruction of Blanche and her struggles with the contradictory demands of society, Williams expressed a lament for the destruction of the old South, making clear his understanding that such change was inevitable.

CRITICAL OVERVIEW

A Streetcar Named Desire premiered in Boston and Philadelphia, then in New York on December 4, 1947, to almost unanimously laudatory reviews. *The New Yorker* described *Streetcar* as "deeply disturbing—a brilliant, implacable play about the disintegration of a woman, or, if you like, of a society."

Streetcar was highly praised by its first director, Elia Kazan, who, from his knowledge of Williams' character, was one of the first to point out psychological similarities between Williams and Blanche. Kazan noted that "I keep linking Blanche and Tennessee . . . Blanche is attracted by the man who is going to destroy her. . . . I also noticed that at the end of the play—all was an author's essential statement—Stella, having witnessed her sister's being destroyed by her husband, then taken away to an institution with her mind split, felt grief and remorse but not an enduring alienation from her husband. . . . The implication at the end of the play is that Stella will very soon return to Stanley's arms—and to his bed. That night, in fact. Indifference? Callousness? No. Fidelity to life. Williams' goal. We go on with life, he was saying, the best we can. People get hurt, but you can't get through life without hurting people."

Other critics were not always so appreciative or understanding. The distinguished American critic Mary McCarthy summarized Blanche with considerably less sympathy, remarking that in her character Williams had "caught a flickering glimpse of the faded essence of the sister-in-law: thin, vapid, neurasthenic, romancing, genteel, pathetic . . . a refined pushover and perennial and frigid spinster." McCarthy criticized Williams' for crafting Blanche's character with the trappings of "inconceivable" tragedy and melodrama, commenting that the playwright's work "reeks of literary ambition as the

apartment reeks of cheap perfume: it is impossible to witness one of Mr. Williams' plays without being aware of the pervading smell of careerism."

Audiences clearly disagreed: *Streetcar* ran for eight hundred and fifty performances on Broadway. It also won the Pulitzer Prize, the Drama Critics' Circle Award and the Donaldson Award.

The 1951 film adaptation won the New York Critics' Film Award and several Academy Awards.

CRITICISM

Joanne Woolway

Woolway is an author, editor, and educator affiliated with Oriel College, Oxford, England. Her essay examines Williams's themes of sex and violence, as well as the way in which the two are linked.

Violence in *A Streetcar Named Desire* is fraught with sexual passion. Trying to convince Blanche of her love for Stanley despite his occasional brutality, Stella explains, "But there are things that happen between a man and a woman in the dark—that sort of make everything else seem—unimportant." Eunice and Steve Hubbell's relationship also has this element of violence, and there is an unnerving suggestion that violence is more common and more willingly accepted by the female partner in a marriage than one would like to believe.

Blanche translates Stella's comment into the context of sexual passion, claiming that, "What you are talking about is brutal desire—just—Desire!—the name of that rattle-trap street-car that bangs through the Quarter, up one old narrow street and down another." Stella asks, "Haven't you ever ridden on that street-car?" and Blanche responds, "It brought me here.—Where I'm not wanted and where I'm ashamed to be." It appears that the connection in Blanche's past between violence and desire in some way contributes to the events within the time scale of the play. This is not to excuse Stanley's later act of violence or to suggest that Blanche brings it on herself—rather, Williams is demonstrating how a cycle of violence, combined with passion and desire, is hard to break.

The attraction between Blanche and Stanley gains an interesting perspective when compared to a work of classical literature by the Latin poet Ovid. In *Metamorphoses*, Philomela is raped by her broth-

WHAT DO I READ NEXT?



- Stanley Clisby Arthur's *Old New Orleans* (Gretna, La.: Pelican, 1990) provides an insightful picture into the setting of Williams' play and a view of the American South in the first half of the twentieth century.
- Williams' earlier play, *The Glass Menagerie* (1944), also portrays a Southern belle, Amanda Wingfield, who represents the playwright's ambiguous feelings about his mother's pretensions, possessiveness, and insensitivity. She also shares some similarities with Blanche Du Bois.
- The memoir of Williams' mother, *Remember Me to Tom* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1964), provides insight into the relationship between mother and son. This account was ghost-written by Lucy Freeman.
- Margaret Mitchell's 1936 bestseller, *Gone With the Wind*, is set in the antebellum era in the American South on through the aftermath of the Civil War. Depicting the porticoed mansions of Southern planters, the suffering of black slaves, and the unspoiled glamour of Southern belles, this novel (and the more famous film, which, like *Streetcar*, starred Vivien Leigh) was one of the last popular works to idealize the South.

er-in-law Tereus while visiting her sister Procne. He cuts out her tongue so that she cannot tell what he has done. Philomela, however, embroiders a story picture to convey to her sister the recent events and Procne, in revenge, kills their son and serves him up in a pie which she encourages Tereus to eat.

Similarly, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Stanley assaults his sister-in-law while his wife is away (in this case giving birth to their baby). But there are two substantial differences in the events which build up to the story's climax.

First, in Ovid's story there is no suggestion that Philomela associates sex with violence. There is no history of her previous lovers or any attraction between her and Tereus. In Williams's play, however, the issue of rape is confused because of Blanche's previous attraction for Stanley as well as her promiscuous past.

In a rape trial today, evidence of a woman's past sexual behavior would be discounted. If force was used by a man during sex, he has committed rape regardless of how the woman behaved in previous encounters. Williams was aware that many Americans did not always sympathize with the victim—it was all too easy to condemn women for their "loose" behavior and claim that female vic-

tims of rape brought sexual violence upon themselves. An indication of the chauvinism that still thrived during the 1940s can be found in the reviews by certain critics who covered the premiere of *Streetcar*; they interpreted Blanche's fate as the punishment for a fallen woman.

The issue is further complicated by Blanche's complex psyche. When talking about the combination of passion and violence in love, she appears strangely fascinated and not entirely repulsed by the thought. Speaking elliptically of the sexual arousal which violence can bring, Blanche comments, "Of course there is such a thing as the hostility of—perhaps in some perverse kind of way he—No! To think of it makes me. . . ." Violence is a phenomenon Blanche knows to be bound up with sex, even if she chooses to appear to Mitch as sexually naive.

A second important difference from Ovid's story is that Blanche's sister does not believe her story and, consequently, gives her no support. Whereas Procne concocts revenge on her unfaithful and violent husband, Stella is actually part of Blanche's downfall, supporting Stanley's cruel act of placing her in a mental institution. Not only is Stanley powerful, he is not checked in any way by the family structure that should provide some protec-



Marlon Brando and Jessica Tandy in the Broadway production

tion and support for Blanche. In this case, blood is most definitely not thicker than water.

Given that these two changes in focus appear to be deliberate, *Streetcar* paints a grim picture for women. Females in the play accept and perhaps even welcome sexual violence as part of life, and their family structures offer little protection from the predators.

Of course, there is more to it than that. It could be argued that *Streetcar* is only superficially about the roles and positions of women in society. Elia Kazan, *Streetcar*'s first director, commented on the issues which hover beneath the play's surface: "I keep linking Blanche and Tennessee . . . Blanche is attracted by the man who is going to destroy her. I understand the play by this formula of ambivalence. Only then, it seemed to me, would I think of it as Tennessee meant it to be understood: with fidelity to life as he—not us groundlings, that he—had experienced it. The reference to the kind of life Tennessee was leading at the time was clear. Williams was aware of the dangers he was inviting when he cruised; he knew that sooner or later he'd be beaten up. And he was. Still, I felt even this promise of violence exhilarated him."

While Blanche is often compared to Williams himself, Stanley—according to Williams's biographers—is based heavily on the playwright's brutal father, who taunted Williams about his effeminacy when he was a boy. In this light, the central issue in *Streetcar* is not necessarily violence towards women, but Williams's personal experience of brutality and the self-destructive enjoyment of fear which came out in the homosexual promiscuity he practiced as an adult.

Streetcar can be seen as an attempt to work through the purgatory of this fear and self-destruction. In addition to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, *Streetcar* has referenced other classical models of literature. It is from Virgil's *Aeneid* that Williams took the name of the slum in New Orleans, "Elysian Fields": in Virgil's poem this is the place where the dead were made to drink water from the river Lethe to forget all traces of their mortal past. Both Blanche's drinking and her endless hot baths suggest that she is attempting to wash away her past and emerge through a sort of watery purgatory. She is not successful and the playgoer is left with little hope for Blanche's future. Through Blanche's bleakness and hopelessness, Williams expressed his own struggles with depression, moments of mental illness, and the alcohol and drugs that finally cost him his life.

Williams also offered a clue to the desolation and loneliness he felt in his often anonymous homosexual life in the play's epigram: "And so it was I entered the broken world / To trace the visionary company of love, its voice / An instant in the wind [I know not whither hurled] / But not for long to hold each desperate choice." The lines are from "The Broken Tower," by the poet Hart Crane who lived from 1899 to 1932. Like Williams he was homosexual and much of his poetry conveys a sense of isolation and failure. This is one of the last poems Crane wrote before committing suicide by jumping off the ship he was traveling on. He, presumably, was buried at sea, just as Blanche wished to be. The epigram is appropriate for a tragic play that tells the story of a woman's destruction at the hands of a cruel society.

Source: Joanne Woolway, in an essay for *Drama for Students*, Gale 1997

John J. Mood

A contributor to numerous journals, Mood served as an English professor at Ball State University. In

this excerpt, he examines the symbolic nature of Blanche DuBois's entrance dialogue in *A Streetcar Named Desire*.

One of the most provocative entrance speeches in drama is the well-known enigmatic statement by Blanche DuBois, the second of Williams' numerous compelling women, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*:

BLANCHE [with faintly hysterical humor]: They told me to take a streetcar named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries and ride six blocks and then get off at—Elysian Fields!

These words have often been noted and discussed for both their realistic and symbolic significance. They have never been examined, however, as a clue to the structural development and design of the play itself and of the course of the life and fate of Blanche as portrayed in the drama.

The statement can be seen as having two parts, the first of which ("take a street-car named Desire, and then transfer to one called Cemeteries") deals with the events of Blanche's life before the play opens, and the second of which ("ride six blocks and then get off at—Elysian Fields") deals with the play itself.

During the course of the play, the audience learns the story of Blanche's life prior to the time of the drama. What is vividly unfolded to us is that Blanche had taken the streetcar named Desire, and had transferred to the one called Cemeteries. We learn of Blanche's youthful loving desire for Allan Grey, her young husband. It was indeed a loving desire, and Blanche was one who could love greatly:

When I was sixteen, I made the discovery—love. All at once and much, much too completely. It was like you suddenly turned a blinding light on something that had always been half in shadow, that's how it struck the world for me (*A Streetcar Named Desire*, New American Library, 1963).

This was loving desire, the same loving desire that Stella has for Stanley—not that "brutal desire" of which Blanche speaks. This is the loving sensual desire which leads not to death but to life and wisdom. It is that loving desire, that Eros, which, as Blanche sees, lights up the world.

But her discovery of her young husband's homosexuality and her shocked brutal words to him ["I saw! I know! You disgust me. . ."] which result in his suicide—this traumatic event twists Blanche's loving desire into hate and self-loathing.



BLANCHE DIMLY REALIZES

THAT SHE IS DEAD, THAT SHE IS
STILL ON THE STREETCAR CALLED
CEMETERIES, THAT SHE HAS MISSED
THE STOP AT ELYSIAN FIELDS"

And disgust and self-hate result in her life of destructive lust for young men. Thus her loving desire becomes brutal desire, unloving desire. It becomes that sheer lust which is a kind of real death. Blanche, in short, has transferred to the streetcar named Cemeteries. She is psychically dead, and cannot stand the light ["The dark is comforting to me."].

At that point in Blanche's life, the play begins. And "Cemeteries" takes on a subtly different meaning. Death can bring heaven or hell. Blanche can "ride six blocks and then get off at—Elysian Fields!" She can continue her course on the streetcar called Cemeteries toward the final death—or obtain heavenly bliss. And the latter will take *six blocks*. Another play by Williams, *Camino Real*, has no act divisions, only sixteen scenes (just as *Streetcar* has no acts, only eleven scenes. Blanche and Mitch have a moment of tenderness at the end of their first date. In response to this kindness, Blanche confesses to Mitch (and to the audience) the ugly story of how she destroyed her young husband. It is a remarkable moment of striking honesty. This moment of honesty elicits further kindness and even the beginning of love from Mitch: "You need somebody. And I need somebody, too. Could it be—you and me, Blanche?" And Blanche, "*in long, grateful sobs*" replies: "Sometimes—there's God—so quickly!"

Thus, at the end of the sixth scene, the sixth block on her ride of death, Blanche indeed is on the threshold of finding "God," "Elysian Fields," loving desire. At that point, she has life within her grasp. It is the turning point of the play. But the opportunity passes. The very next scene quickly demonstrates that Blanche has resumed her illusions and games with Mitch, and thus her chance for life is lost. The final scenes portray this with an appalling inexorability. Had the incipient honesty



TENNESSEE WILLIAMS HAS
BROUGHT US A SUPERB DRAMA, A
STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE"

and loving desire between Blanche and Mitch been nurtured with further openness and vulnerability, Stanley would never have raped her.

Near the end of the play, this fate is made explicit, The Mexican Woman appears, chanting her wares: "Flores? Flores para los muertos?" (Flowers? Flowers for the dead?) Blanche dimly realizes that she is dead, that she is still on the streetcar called Cemeteries, that she has missed the stop at Elysian Fields, that she is doomed to sterile dead lust, when, in a kind of real recognition, she observes in response to the old woman: "Death— . . . The opposite is desire." She has dimly realized that desire *is* the opposite of death, that the desire which is the opposite of death is open, honest, forgiving, loving desire, the kind Stanley and Stella have for each other.

The most that Blanche can expect now is "Kindness." All that remains for her is her final tragic collapse.

Source: John J. Mood, "The Structure of *A Streetcar Named Desire*" in *Ball State University Forum*, Vol. 14, no. 3, Summer, 1973, pp. 9–10.

Brooks Atkinson

First published on December 4, 1947, this laudatory review by Atkinson appraises the play's debut and labels Williams's work as a "superb drama."

Tennessee Williams has brought us a superb drama, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which was acted at the Ethel Barrymore last evening. And Jessica Tandy gives a superb performance as rueful heroine whose misery Mr. Williams is tenderly recording. This must be one of the most perfect marriages of acting and playwriting. For the acting and playwriting are perfectly blended in a limpid performance, and it is impossible to tell where Miss Tandy begins to give form and warmth to the mood Mr. Williams has created.

Like *The Glass Menagerie*, the new play is a quietly woven study of intangibles. But to this observer it shows deeper insight and represents a great step forward toward clarity. And it reveals Mr. Williams as a genuinely poetic playwright whose knowledge of people is honest and thorough and whose sympathy is profoundly human.

A Streetcar Named Desire is history of a gently reared Mississippi young woman who invents an artificial world to mask the hideousness of the world she has to inhabit. She comes to live with her sister, who is married to a rough-and-ready mechanic and inhabits two dreary rooms in a squalid neighborhood. Blanche—for that is her name—has delusions of grandeur, talks like an intellectual snob, buoys herself up with gaudy dreams, spends most of her time primping, covers things that are dingy with things that are bright and flees reality.

To her brother-in-law she is an unforgivable liar. But it is soon apparent to the theatregoer that in Mr. Williams' eyes she is one of the dispossessed whose experience has unfitted her for reality; and although his attitude toward her is merciful, he does not spare her or the playgoer. For the events of *Streetcar* lead to a painful conclusion which he does not try to avoid. Although Blanche cannot face the truth, Mr. Williams does in the most imaginative and perceptive play he has written.

Since he is no literal dramatist and writes in none of the conventional forms, he presents the theatre with many problems. Under Elia Kazan's sensitive but concrete direction, the theatre has solved them admirably. Jo Mielziner has provided a beautifully lighted single setting that lightly sketches the house and the neighborhood. In this shadowy environment the performance is a work of great beauty.

Miss Tandy has a remarkably long part to play. She is hardly ever off the stage, and when she is on stage she is almost constantly talking — chattering, dreaming aloud, wondering, building enchantments out of words. Miss Tandy is a trim, agile actress with a lovely voice and quick intelligence. Her performance is almost incredibly true. For it does seem almost incredible that she could understand such an elusive part so thoroughly and that she can convey it with so many shades and impulses that are accurate, revealing and true.

The rest of the acting is also of very high quality indeed. Marlon Brando as the quick-tempered, scornful, violent mechanic; Karl Malden as a stupid

but wondering suitor; Kim Hunter as the patient though troubled sister—all act not only with color and style but with insight.

By the usual Broadway standards, *A Streetcar Named Desire* is too long; not all those Words are essential. But Mr. Williams is entitled to his own independence. For he has not forgotten that human beings are the basic subject of art. Out of poetic imagination and ordinary compassion he has spun a poignant and luminous story.

Source: Brooks Atkinson, in a review of *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947) in *On Stage: Selected Theater Reviews from the New York Times, 1920–1970*, edited by Bernard Beckerman and Howard Siegman, Arno Press, 1973, pp. 286–87.

FURTHER READING

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Charts Williams' reception among the important critics and writers of this century

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A varied discussion of the major themes in Williams' work.

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Includes essays by people who knew and worked with Williams and provides an interesting critical perspective on his work.